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SIPDIS

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SUBJECT: NIGERIA -- ZIMBABWE IN THE NEWS

Classified by Ambassador Howard F. Jeter. Reasons 1.5 (b) and (d).

1. (U) To the apparent chagrin of President Obasanjo, news of the President's late January discussions with President Mugabe in Harare has leaked. ThisDay February 26 reported Presidential Special Assistant Tunji Oseni refuting rumors that Obasanjo offered asylum to Mugabe. In his statement, Oseni claimed that rumors of the offer and of Nigeria positioning a helicopter in Harare to afford Mugabe a quick exit should he lose the election were "baseless and untrue." Oseni reportedly said the two Heads of State never discussed the possibility of Mugabe's departure.

2. (C) Oseni's public disclaimer, however, does not jibe exactly with what NSA Aliyu Mohammed told us privately. During a February conversation with Ambassador Jeter (septel), Mohammed stated that Obasanjo recommended to Mugabe that he retire and not seek reelection. However, Mugabe said he was committed to running and could not back down. The Zimbabwean reportedly hinted that he might consider retirement after winning the election. (Mugabe's last statement strikes us probably as unlikely as it is illogical.)

3. (SBU) Meanwhile, the Nigerian Labour Congress and the Ghanaian Trade Union Congress, after a conference in Abuja, issued a communique condemning electoral restrictions in Zimbabwe. The communique described recent Government of Zimbabwe measures as restrictive, repressive and calculated to perpetuate Mugabe's tenure in office. NLC castigation of Mugabe is a noteworthy sign that the NLC leadership believes its commitment to democracy should outweigh other considerations that, in the past, often kept organized labor from echoing Western criticism of many African leaders' undemocratic practices. The NLC also might have a more parochial reason for the statement. It probably wanted to send a signal to domestic politicians that organized labor also will not endorse electoral skullduggery at home in 2003.

4. (C) Comment: Based on what Mohammed told us, Oseni's press denial is not completely accurate. Because of Obasanjo's involvement in Zimbabwe and his personal approach to resolving crisis, it would not come as a shock if Obasanjo offered asylum to Mugabe. (Nigeria has certainly harbored deposed leaders before.) However, before broaching retirement with Mugabe, Obasanjo would have given the issue some thought. He would have had in mind that Mugabe would need a place to retire to and that place would have to accept Mugabe while being acceptable to him. In Obasanjo's mind, Nigeria would be just as good if not a better option than any other country.
Jeter